Richard Arena on Sraffa and Wittgenstein

By

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Abstract: This paper discusses Richard Arena’s insightful and original contributions to interpreting the important interaction between Piero Sraffa and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It discusses this in terms of dilemmas they each encountered in transitions in their thinking in the 1930s, emphasizes the influence of Sraffa’s unpublished “Surplus Product” text, compares Sraffa’s critique of “natural science point of view” and Wittgenstein’s critique of logical form, and compares Sraffa’s later understanding of the relationship between production and distribution and Wittgenstein’s later understanding of forms of life and language-games. The paper argues this thinking opened up a approach to economic philosophy in connection with the distinction between open and closed systems. Arena has been a leading proponent open systems thinking in economics. He thus reminds us, in Wittgenstein’s words – ’Don’t think, but look!’ – or look beyond what one might think ones sees in a closed systems way.

Keywords: Arena, Sraffa, Wittgenstein, surplus product, language games, open-closed systems

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1. Introduction: Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s interaction as a subject of investigation

Among his many achievements as a distinguished historian and methodologist of economics, Richard Arena is one of the principle contributors to the interpretation of the interaction between Piero Sraffa and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and as such has helped make this interaction an important subject of investigation regarding the boundaries and connections between economics and philosophy in the Classical surplus approach. As is well known, Sraffa and Wittgenstein were friends and interlocutors for a number of years in Cambridge, and this influenced the thinking of each in their two different domains of investigation. Famously, Wittgenstein in the preface to his later influential Philosophical Investigations (1953), somewhat cryptically, credited Sraffa with a highly important role in helping him see the limitations of his earlier Tractatus (1922) thinking and in identifying foundational ideas for the Investigations. Sraffa, for his part, left little record of his understanding of their interaction, how he may have influenced Wittgenstein, and how it may have affected his own later highly important Production of Commodities (1960). It is not easy, then, to evaluate how Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s interaction affected them each, or what this means
for philosophy and economics in the Classical approach. Nonetheless, the influential character of the work each did keeps how they might have influenced each other a significant subject of investigation. How, then, has it been investigated?

On the one hand, philosophers have shown relatively little interest in Sraffa’s influence on Wittgenstein,\footnote{Though see Monk (1991) and Marion (2008).} likely because it is more important to them to assess Wittgenstein’s later thinking in its own terms and in relation to his impact on philosophy, but also likely because they have little understanding of Sraffa’s ideas, of economics, of how Sraffa’s ideas relate to economics, and thus how they might have affected what Wittgenstein was concerned with. On the other hand, the few researchers in economics who have been interested in the subject have been Sraffa scholars, who in turn have limited knowledge of philosophy, and are primarily concerned with how Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s interaction might have influenced Sraffa. What is accordingly missing in these two domains is an analysis and investigation of first what their possibly shared thinking was, en route to how it may have played a role in their respective contributions and fields.

Richard Arena is an exception in this regard, since he has written on what that shared thinking involves. As an accomplished Sraffa scholar, he of course still has a special interest in Sraffa’s role in Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s interaction and what that means for interpreting the *Production of Commodities*. At the same time, his contribution stands as an independent statement of how the social world, both in economic life and generally, can be explained and understood according to how Sraffa and Wittgenstein saw it. Indeed, that Sraffa and Wittgenstein had quite different concerns, and that the same is true of economists and philosophers, provides grounds for seeing their interaction as providing foundations for a general statement of how the social world, both in economic life and elsewhere, can be explained and understood independently of the immediate concerns of economics and philosophy.

What this chapter then aims to do is, first, set out how Arena understands the shared contribution arising from Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s interaction, and second, comment on how his understanding opens up new topics for economic philosophy, particularly in connection with the distinction between open and closed systems. That distinction has become increasingly important in heterodox economics, and arguably represents one of its fundamental philosophical departures from mainstream economic thinking. Overall, the chapter’s goal is to contribute to the development of philosophical thinking about the nature of social life with special attention to economics – and to honor Arena’s important contribution and well-deserved status as one of the leading figures in our field.

2. Arena’s contribution to thinking about Sraffa and Wittgenstein

Arena (2013, 2015) advances what he terms a morphological, comparative analysis of the economic foundation of surplus-based economics in the Classical tradition of economics. Though he seeks to explain the social foundations of economic life, his use of Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s interaction as a means of laying out these foundations makes his account a general one that applies to the social domain generally. If we then characterize the kind of thinking involved, we should first say it is ontological, meaning it concerns what fundamentally underlies the variety and range
of phenomena in social life. This leads to a next level of philosophical concern, an epistemological one, where we investigate what goals of knowledge and how knowledge claims can be assessed in science. In philosophy and in economic philosophy the latter epistemological concern predominates and the former ontological one is often neglected. But it seems an error to assume that one’s epistemological thinking can proceed independently of one’s ontological thinking, since the former depend on positions taken regarding what the world is. That is, we cannot reason about how knowledge is produced if we do not first say what it is about.

In economics, especially under the strong influence of mainstream economics, the detachment of epistemological thinking from discussion of its underlying ontological thinking, coupled with inevitable disagreements (if implicit) over what those ontological foundations are, has arguably had the effect of compartmentalizing the field into different, largely non-communicating schools of thought (Dow 1985). This then produces a fragmentation of the science whereby different schools are closed off from criticism and evaluation from other schools (Cedrini and Fontana 2018). Economics consequently is made up of sets of what we can call relatively closed schools of thought that compete to promote their different approaches via competition over resources devoted to the field. This might seem to produce a pluralistic science open to many approaches, but that is inconsistent with the field’s schools’ insular, closed characters. Pluralism in science, it seems fair to say, involves not just multiple approaches, but also exchange between them made possible by their engagement with one another. Thus, since pluralism in science is widely and justifiably valued, we ought to ask what steps might be taken to address this state of affairs. Arena’s thinking about the relationship between Sraffa and Wittgenstein provides guidance in this regard, and also tells us important things about the links between ontology and epistemology in economics.

Arena, then, presents his interpretation of Sraffa’s thinking as an alternative to two previous interpretations of it in the literature, a classical general equilibrium theory approach – the idea of an economic order without process – and a long-period positions approach – with a uniformity of profit rates basis (Arena 2015, 1088-1096). One disadvantage of these two strategies of interpretation, then, is that they make their interpretation of Sraffa’s thinking rely only on economic theory ideas and accordingly frame it in an essentially non-philosophical way. A further disadvantage is that since neither makes use of Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s interaction, they effectively make Sraffa a product of the past history of political economy antedating that interaction, though Sraffa was certainly also a product of his reading of the political economy of his time, and may well have developed his thinking at a philosophical level in his discussions with Wittgenstein.

As an alternative strategy, Arena sets out to explicitly identify Sraffa’s philosophical thinking as might encompass both past and present. Given the little Sraffa wrote on the subject, and in light of the little information available regarding Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s communication and interaction, how is one to proceed? Wittgenstein’s generous acknowledgement of Sraffa’s influence in the Investigations preface clearly means Sraffa had a philosophical impact upon him.

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2 Lawson’s influential work regarding the ontological is an important exception (1997, 2012).

3 For a statement of the evidence we have regarding how Sraffa influenced Wittgenstein, see the account of Sen, who knew Sraffa personally (Sen 2003; also 2021, 351-5).
Arena’s strategy, then, is to elicit Sraffa’s philosophical thinking by determining what ideas the two might have shared starting with how Wittgenstein later stated them in the *Investigations*.

Note something conceptually important about this strategy. It makes change in ideas, not only Wittgenstein’s but Sraffa’s as well, central to their interpretation. That Wittgenstein’s ideas dramatically changed as he gave up the arguments of his early *Tractatus* is well known, but Sraffa’s ideas also developed over the time he and Wittgenstein interacted, moving from his early interest in and critical reading of Marshallian competitive market analysis (Sraffa 1926) to his later work on David Ricardo and his *Production of Commodities* determination of commodity prices independent of demand. Examining thinking around change in people’s ideas, then, creates important opportunities for their interpretation and explanation, since it makes new concepts and arguments conceptually distinct and prominent by setting them off against those explicitly given up. That Sraffa and Wittgenstein both were engaged in developing new concepts and arguments and shared this task arguably enhances the identification of each, as they reinforced in each other the need to develop the new paths they believed should be taken.4

In his reading of Wittgenstein’s later thinking, then, Arena focuses on two of Wittgenstein’s later key concepts – forms of life and language-games – and asks how they might be understood as shared philosophical foundations for both Sraffa and Wittgenstein. A clue regarding their shared importance is that according to Wittgenstein (as he is he reported as having told Rush Rhees), what made the greatest difference to the development of his later thinking was his being convinced from his conversations with Sraffa of the need for an ‘anthropological way of confronting philosophical problems’ (Monk 1991, 260). An ‘anthropological way’ of thinking as the overarching conception of a new philosophical approach made forms of life and language-games the concepts that signaled how this new approach would be developed in departing from earlier thinking. Forms of life is clearly an anthropological sort of idea, and one that had been missing from earlier philosophical reasoning. The same applies to the concept of language games since the idea that language is something that is played like a game is entirely different from the philosophical-logical idea of language in the *Tractatus*.

Wittgenstein thus argued that we should begin by looking at language as an ordinary activity in which people, metaphorically speaking, communicated through many kinds of ways they interacted in game-like fashion. “Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is a part of an activity, or a form of life” (Wittgenstein 1953, 360). One talks about forms of life when one employs an ‘anthropological’-philosophical way of thinking. That way of thinking calls for attention to people’s actual capabilities, existing social practices, and their on-going and shared ways of managing their lives, not to abstract, transcendent structures remote from people’s day-to-day lives.

How is speaking a language like a playing game? Games have rules governing how people play them. Similarly, language is rule-governed, and ‘playing’ it, or communicating with others, requires that one observes the rules in order to be successful in playing/communicating with others. Games of whatever kind thus have a structure that delimits and defines a particular kind of activity. At the same time, the rules of language-games are not rigid and highly determinate as in the case

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4 I make change a fulcrum in the development of Sraffa’s later thinking in Davis (2012). Section 3 reviews the open-closed system argument used to interpret it in Davis (2018, 2021).
of an abstract, logical rule because speaking a language is an activity subject to many factors that vary across the many different social contexts in which any given expression in a language may be used. Indeed, one of the distinctive characteristics of ordinary, natural language is its versatility. An expression customarily used in one way can find new uses in new settings if the people using it succeed in communicating with one another in those new settings. Language is thus rule-governed, but in an open sort of way.

Arena (2015, 1098) notes that in his copy of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* Sraffa had highlighted the following text: “Or a rule is employed neither in the teaching nor in the game itself; nor it is set down in a list of rules. One learns the game by watching how others play. *But we say that it is played according to such-and-such rules because an observer can read these rules off the practice of the game – like a natural law governing the play* (Wittgenstein 1953 edition in Sraffa’s personal library, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge; emphasis added by Sraffa). Actual ordinary language is thus an open, often vague, dynamic phenomenon, not a closed, determinate, static structure.

In contrast, the *Tractatus*, to the extent that we can say that in it rules applied to language, only allowed expressions to be used in set, rigid ways. Language is made up of simple logical propositions that Wittgenstein said, as it were, ‘picture’ facts about the world, and thus to properly picture them – and to capture the nature of reality – required that those propositions have only a single, logical structure correspondent to a single reality made up of facts. In the *Investigations*, the rules that determine language use instead make up a grammar that refers us to norms implicit in people’s communication, and since norms themselves depend on their social contexts, they can change and evolve. Thus, a formal language’s logical structure and a natural language’s grammar are entirely different kinds of things, the first fully abstract in character and the second, anthropologically speaking, a form of life.

Arena characterizes his interpretative approach as a morphological, comparative type of analysis. Morphology is used in biology and linguistics to refer to structures in living processes, organisms in biology and language behaviors in linguistics. A morphological analysis concerns living things, ground-up, not abstract logical structures, top-down. Nonetheless, like the latter, structures in living things have, as *per se* structures, still some degree of stability and permanence. They differ from abstract logical structures in their embeddedness in living things, though what this involves is complicated and subject to scholarly debate. At the very least, it is reasonable to say that how morphological structures function reflects the activities of those in whom we observe them.

Above I distinguished epistemological and ontological dimensions of philosophical thinking in economics. The ontological dimension is what a concern with the nature of structures involves. Ontological philosophical thinking seeks to explain what exists or what structures the world, so the morphological approach Arena pursues aims to explain economic phenomena in terms of their basis in distinct types of structure that underlie economic behavior. In effect, if we read between the lines of what we observe when individuals acts in various ways, our explanations make assumptions about the nature and role those underlying structures have in shaping behavior. Thus, a morphological approach is an ontological one appropriate to living things. An ontological approach then sets the stage for epistemological investigations concerning what we can know about the world given its underlying structures.
Arena also characterizes his strategy of interpretation as comparative. What is it that is the subject of comparison for both Wittgenstein and Sraffa? For Wittgenstein, one subject is different types of forms of life that he describes as language-games. For example, how people respond to greetings is rule-governed in ways that determine their expectations about how they communicate with one another. For Sraffa, who saw himself explaining economic production and distribution, the form of life he examined was surplus-producing economies. The rule-governed character of such economies then depended on how economies surpluses are distributed. Different distributive arrangements, in effect, refer us to different economic-games akin philosophically to different language-games. These can be compared as for example when wages include a large or small share of an economy’s surplus.

The morphological approach, then, in the first instance puts aside any dynamics or processes in which structures are embedded and which might change them over time. The description of a given structure, a language-game or an economic-game, is taken to be a relatively complete object of investigation in itself prior to any investigation of how it might change. That is, such structures are like ‘snapshots’ or ‘instantaneous photographs’ which we need to understand in themselves when we take an anthropological approach to the world (Blankenburg et al. 2012; Arena 2015). Later, Sraffa indeed uses this idea in referring to a determinate ‘annual cycle of production’ in his Production of Commodities (1960, 3, 10). There he lays out a set of relationships between inputs and outputs that generate a full set of market prices, given either a wage rate or interest rate. Should the wage rate or interest rate change, we can then compare the market prices before and after that change. Any such comparison, that is, presupposes we are first clear about what will be compared.

Yet this strategy leaves us with a puzzle. In Sraffa’s Production of Commodities case, what changes from one wage or interest rate regime to another are only the market prices themselves. Change is confined to values and does not affect the set of production relationships between inputs and outputs. We might reasonably characterize them as technical and thus slow-changing, and that can be set aside when the goal is to explain price relationship ‘snapshots.’ This, however, does not preclude that the sorts of changes that impact different language-game or economic-games also somehow impact their structures at some point. Conceivably, in worlds of living things, change may so much affect some structures that at some point we can no longer identify them as the same structures.

At issue here is the relationship between change and structure – a fundamental ontological issue. While at a first pass we may focus on cases where structures endure and focus on change within structures, at a second pass we need to examine cases where those structures are themselves are affected. This, it seems fair to say, calls for a more complex understanding of the types of structures that concerned Sraffa and Wittgenstein. How, then, do we need to develop our conception of a structure to do this? I argue in the next section that in an unpublished writing from 1931 Sraffa outlined what this involved. It especially relies on the difference between Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s anthropological, form of life conception of a structure and the abstract, logical type of structure from which it can be distinguished.

3. The change in Sraffa and Wittgenstein’s thinking
Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge in 1929 and he and Sraffa began regular conversations quite soon thereafter. Sraffa had published his critique of Alfred Marshall’s competitive market analysis a few years before (Sraffa, 1926), and had embarked on developing a new approach in economics drawn from Classical economic thinking. He published little on this until much later but left quite a large number of unpublished writings from the 1930s that are deposited in the Wren Library in Trinity College. They record his efforts to find new foundations for economics, and made the issue of change away from old ideas to new ones central to the development of his thinking. Further, philosophical issues were clearly central to Sraffa in his own view, in particular in his aim to replace Neoclassical economic thinking’s subjectivist basis for economics with an objectivist or ‘naturalist’ basis he believed reflected a Classical political economy approach (Kurz and Salvadori 2008; Marion 2008; Davis 2012). Subjectivism in Neoclassical economics makes the economy depend on individual preferences and beliefs whereas a Classical political economy with explicitly objectivist foundations makes it depend on how people engage in production employing resources given by nature.5

The consequences of replacing old ideas with new ones came to Sraffa in a particularly painful way early on when he concluded that the objectivist-naturalist philosophical approach he thought appropriate to Classical political economy seemed to leave no room for the concept of a surplus that he believed was central to Classical political economy. Except in subsistence societies, for Classical political economists production always produced more than was needed to replace the resources used up in production process. This was central to the concern with distribution in Classical political economy since it made who received it determinative of how economies operated.6

Sraffa stated the problem he discovered as follows:

If one attempts to take an entirely objectivist point of view, the very conception of a surplus melts away. For if we take this natural science point of view, we must start by assuming that for every effect there must be a sufficient cause, that the causes are identical with their effects, and that there can be nothing in the effect which was not in the causes; in our case, there can be no product for which there has not been an equivalent cost, and all costs (=expenses) must be necessary to produce it (Sraffa 1931, D3/12/7: 161; quoted in Kurz and Salvadori, 2008, 268).

A surplus was an amount of product exceeding resources used up in production process. Those resources had to be understood with the “natural science point of view” and the principle of causality it involved, but there was no place for a surplus on that understanding. Sraffa believed that the surplus arises because capitalists withdraw circulating capital (the expenses associated

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5 Marion uses a more contemporary philosophical label for objectivism: physicalism. Physicalism is the view that scientific explanations need to be framed in the language of physics and the physical sciences. He argues that “one of Wittgenstein’s first and most important moves away from the Tractatus consisted in his adoption, around 1930, of a ‘physicalist’ stance” (Marion, 2008, p. 227). Kurz and Salvadori emphasize Sraffa’s adoption of a natural science point of view associated with idea of real physical costs arising from using up material things in production (Kurz and Salvadori, 2008).

6 Sraffa saw the problem as one a Classical political economy philosophical approach encountered, but he was certainly aware that it was also one a Marxist political economy philosophical approach encountered.
with replacing used up resources) from production in order to engage in luxury consumption. Thus, not only did the concept of a surplus appear inconsistent with an objectivist philosophical approach, but the standard political economic understanding of it employed a subjectivist argument, namely that capitalists’ preferences regarding consumption were its cause.

Wittgenstein can be seen to encounter a dilemma not unrelated to Sraffa’s. His discussions with Sraffa appear to have led him to also adopt a “natural science point of view” or objectivist approach. However, central to the *Tractatus* was the assumption that language possessed a logical form. Norman Malcolm (1958), then, in reporting an event in which Sraffa is said to have disrupted the foundations of Wittgenstein’s early thinking, said Sraffa made a famous Neapolitan gesture (a brushing outward of the hand under the chin as a sign of skepticism) which clearly conveyed meaning. He is said to have asked Wittgenstein for its logical form. Wittgenstein is assumed to have allowed a gesture has meaning, but could not see it having a logical form. This meant language had a different character than he had thought, and that it having a logical form might tell us little about that character.

The challenge both discovered was that the philosophical point of view they were pursuing did not appear to allow them to explain what they thought they needed to explain, the surplus for Sraffa and language meaning for Wittgenstein. Were they, then, to have held to what they thought they needed to explain, what were they to do? I suggest that they needed to somehow modify how they employed and understood that philosophical point of view.

If we then take their shared philosophical point of view to be objectivist or naturalist, what holding it implied was one set of principles derived from that view should be used to explain economic surplus and language meaning. For Sraffa in the passage above, those principles were causal principles of a single kind, namely those that were understood in the language of the physical sciences. What he learned, however, was that another kind of causal principle also operated when surpluses existed: those that showed cause-effect relationships between capitalists’ intentions and their uses of circulating capital. This other type of causal principle was not well described in objectivist or naturalist terms because of the human intentional element, but somehow interacted with the real physical cost sort of causal principle that applied to inputs and outputs.

It seems fair to say that the conclusion Sraffa ultimately drew was that a modified objectivist or naturalist philosophical point of view included both types of causal principles. Human beings are part of the natural world, of course, but their ability to form intentions makes them different from non-human processes, and thus makes causal explanations in social science more complex. Similarly for Wittgenstein, language might have something akin to a logical form, but it could include different kinds of forms, such as how declarative statements conveyed meaning compared to how gestures did.

The objectivist or naturalist perspective, then, is preserved while made more complex in how it applies to the phenomena we investigate. Since the latter is the main object of investigation, what each went on to investigate was how this more complex analysis associated with different kinds of causal principles needed to be employed. For Sraffa this entailed the work that led to his *Production of Commodities*; for Wittgenstein it entailed the work that led to his *Philosophical
*Investigations.* I turn exclusively to Sraffa in the next section to discuss how he pursued this investigation using a distinction between closed and open systems.

### 4. The open-closed distinction

Arena, Dow, and Klaes (2009) employs the open-closed systems distinction in a volume of essays devoted to examining mainstream economics’ nature as a discipline closed off to other social science disciplines. Economics functions as an insular type of research field because its theories and concepts either originate within economics or when borrowed from other fields have been interpreted in keeping with economics’ standard theories and other concepts. In contrast, most other social science disciplines are open types of fields that borrow liberally from each other, and where their borrowed concepts can retain influences from their originating fields.

To generalize this contrast, open disciplines are in effect outward-looking while closed disciplines are inward-looking. Open disciplines are conceptually and theoretically heterogeneous while closed disciplines are conceptually and theoretically homogeneous. Open disciplines are pluralist in nature while closed disciplines are monist in nature.

Methodologically speaking, open disciplines put less weight on internal disciplinary consistency while closed disciplines put considerable weight on internal disciplinary consistency. At issue is whether concepts and theories fall under a single overall conception guiding a discipline or whether there are different competing conceptions of the discipline. In Neoclassical economics, that single overall conception is tied to the idea that the world is governed by scarcity and economic agents seek to maximize their well-being given this, all under the reigning idea that human life should be understood in market exchange terms. Thus, explanations of how economies function only depend on one set of causal principles under which everything should be explained. The field of economics is both closed on this basis and not in need of any different behavioral explanations other social science fields might provide.

In contrast, open disciplines, with their conceptual and theoretical heterogeneity, admit multiple kinds of causal principles. The explanations they provide may or may not attempt to account for the relationships between these different kinds of causal principles. Fields may fragment into different domains of explanation restricted to one set of causal principles, or they may attempt to provide complex explanations that combine different kinds of causal principles.

The latter pathway is the one Sraffa undertook in the 1930s when he discovered that a purely objectivist or naturalist philosophical approach which he wished to substitute for Neoclassical subjectivism eliminated the concept of the surplus. To reconcile that naturalist philosophical approach with the surplus concept he needed not only to recognize different kinds of causal principles were at play in economic life, but more challengingly needed to offer an account of how they interacted.

In Davis (2018, 2021) I discuss how Sraffa proceeded by drawing on the open-closed distinction. How he came to use this distinction is unclear. It had been used in the 1930s by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), an Austrian biologist and one of the originators of general systems theory, to
explain how natural and social sciences differed, but there is no evidence to my knowledge that Sraffa drew upon this. Sraffa, in any case, used the distinction to interpret how a set of equations determining commodity values failed to represent economies generating surpluses unless it was somehow open to factors that lay outside it. He believed the determination of commodity values needed to employ a “natural science point of view” whereby “for every effect there must be a sufficient cause” and “the causes are identical with their effects” (D3/12/7: 161; quoted in Kurz and Salvadori, 2008, p. 268). Yet in economies that generated surpluses, another determinant of commodity values was the decision of capitalists choose to withdraw circulating capital from production in order to engage in luxury consumption that produced an ‘effect which was not in the causes.’ Here there the different type of causal principle operating, one that went beyond a “natural science point of view,” made human decision-making a causal factor.

Sraffa’s statement of this is interesting. He maintained his “natural science point of view” in explaining commodity values, and treated the set of equations determining commodity values as a ‘closed system’ but yet as one that was only incompletely closed and open at the same time to the world of human decision-making. Thus:

There must be a leak at one end or the other: the ‘closed system’ is in communication with the world. When we have defined our ‘economic field’, there are still outside causes which operate in it; and its effects go beyond the boundary (Ibid.).

The “outside causes” associated with capitalist behavior were of a different nature from those determining commodity values. Combining them allowed Sraffa to explain economies that generated surpluses. Explaining this reality entailed one adopt a complex causal account using the open-closed distinction.

Bertalanffy had used the distinction only to contrast different types of sciences or disciplines. Sraffa went further and explained how different domains of activity might interact in complex causal relationships. Arena, Dow, and Klaes (2009) seeks to make the open-closed distinction foundational for a pluralist economics open to other social sciences. It is important to see that Arena’s contribution to this project draws on his history of thinking about economics, the nature of social science, and commitments to a progressive world. They is manifest in his work on Sraffa and Wittgenstein, but I add a further statement in conclusion that traces all this to his qualities as a scholar and person.

5. Richard Arena as a scholar, classical economist, and philosopher of economics

Richard Arena has made insightful, original contributions to explaining and interpreting the important interaction between Piero Sraffa and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The challenge of doing so is due to the limited information about that interaction available to us. That their interaction likely influenced their respective later, highly influential works nonetheless makes it a task that also ought to be undertaken. Richard’s contributions need to be seen in this light. Yet his success in this regard should be seen in another light.
Many researchers would hesitate to undertake this research because they would not have the resources for doing so. Not only do most historians of economics lack a knowledge of twentieth century Anglo-American philosophy, but they also lack an understanding of Classical economic thinking – not just in its nineteenth century mature development in Ricardo but also in its contemporary redevelopment in Sraffa’s twentieth century re-exploration of Ricardo and in his transformative *Production of Commodities* statement of the foundations of a classical surplus economy. Richard’s mastery of both makes his contribution unique and advances our understanding of both as few can.

Richard’s intellectual talents are indisputable but we should also recognize two other scholarly virtues he possesses. First, his command of twentieth century Anglo-American philosophy and Classical economic thinking reflects his ability to go deeper into the roots of ideas than they may appear to have. Indeed, that ideas have deeper dimensions is not even always perceived by many to be an issue. What we can see in their immediate elaboration often seems sufficient to their explication. Yet in line with his commitment to open thinking in economics, Richard instead says – as in Wittgenstein’s words – “Don’t think, but look!” (Wittgenstein, 1953, 66). Or, look beyond what we think we see, and perhaps what we want to say is enough to see in a closed thinking sort of way.

Second, Richard is blessed with another scholarly virtue, harder to state. Where would the intention to always look deeper come from in a researcher? Our professional bias, especially in a world that increasingly values scholarly work according to measurable outputs, inclines us to put aside risky, uncertain investigations into unclear ideas that may demand considerable time and still produce little. Yet the history of science’s advances is very much a record of researchers who undertook this questioning path – some of whom were successful but many if not most of whom were not. I characterize, then, this scholarly virtue as a combination of curiosity and patience. Curiosity, because one has to want to always see what more might underlie what we appear to see. Patience, because looking for something that often vaguely perceived is often a frustrating, unrewarding activity. One thus needs to be curious and also patient if one is to look deeper.

Richard’s remarkable standing as a scholar comes from his special abilities in our field and also from his own personal character as a researcher. His work on Sraffa and Wittgenstein particularly displays this. But his many achievements in our field should be seen in this connection as well. He well deserves to be honored for his unique and important contributions.

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